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# Port Huron nickname quest is rough sailing

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**BY SHAWN WINDSOR**

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

PORT HURON -- The deep blue water was already there. So were the famous international bridge, the lighthouse and the renovated port terminal.

Marine artist Jim Clary expected easy sailing as he sat before a state senate committee in February. He had sought an official sanction to identify his adopted city, Port Huron, with the water.

In a way, too, he was seeking legitimacy for a quiet town with blue-collar roots at the confluence of Lake Huron and the St. Clair River.

Instead, he ran into a hornet's nest in Lansing.

Clary wanted the state Legislature to anoint his city the "Maritime Capital of the Great Lakes," a nickname he coined a few months earlier.

Forget, for a moment, Detroit and Duluth, Minn.; Cleveland; Chicago; Toronto, and Toledo. The committee didn't think Port Huron was more deserving than even Saugatuck or Wyandotte.

"It was like the McCarthy hearings," said Clary, 63.

So Clary and the city -- with support of the council and mayor -- took their fight to Washington.

In March, an attorney hired by Port Huron filed an application with the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. They want ownership of the nickname.

Clary's work is well-known among Great Lakes boaters and sailors; he paints shipwrecks and freighters, hydroplanes and tall ships. He sold his paintings in a gallery in St. Clair for 25 years. That's where he got the idea for a maritime marketing campaign.

## Anybody's ballgame

Six years ago, he moved his gallery a few miles north to Port Huron, though he kept his home in St. Clair. Last May, he and a friend came up with "Maritime Capital of the Great Lakes."

He searched the Internet to see if anyone else had claimed it.

It was up for grabs.

The City Council unanimously voted to adopt the name and eventually agreed to spend \$10,000 to design a Web site around it.

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The rumblings began, especially in Duluth, Minn., where commercial ships transport more cargo than any other port on the Great Lakes.

Thom Holden, director of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Lake Superior Maritime Museum, said in the Duluth News Tribune, "There's a lot of reasons why we should be the capital, not them."

Sour grapes, Port Huron city officials said.

"My gut feeling is that Port Huron has really tapped into something here," said Cliff Schrader, a city councilman and lifelong resident. "Other communities aren't as sharp as we are and are upset they missed the ball. Everybody else was sitting on their butts."

Schrader chuckled when he said this. In fact, chuckling is a common reaction when many hear Port Huron and "capital" in the same sentence.

Perhaps it's the notion of a little town reaching too high.

"Frankly, I thought 'Blue Water Area' was fine," said Tom Durant, the executive producer of PBS's "Great Lakes Ports O' Call," the TV series that explores port life on the massive freshwater system.

Durant has produced 47 episodes, including one in Port Huron three years ago.

"There is a lot of history there," he said, speaking of the shipbuilding and now defunct commercial port.

Though the freighters rarely stop there, "you can't find a better place for watching ships. You feel as if you can reach out and touch them."

But Durant questions whether ports need nicknames. Tourists smell hype.

Goderich, Ontario, calls itself "the prettiest town in Canada." Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, says it's "naturally gifted." And Saugatuck, which doesn't need the help, nevertheless once billed itself as the "white coast of Michigan."

It didn't take long for the tony little resort on Lake Michigan to change its nickname to "the art coast of Michigan."

The problem is that Port Huron wants to be taken seriously as a place to relax and enjoy the water, which is legitimately stunning. The current is fast; the color is fluorescent blue. City officials want to draw visitors from metro Detroit's 4.5 million population.

But if the nickname elicits smirks and disbelief, then what?

Planners, developers and the mayor, Mark Neal, begin listing attractions: a Coast Guard cutter, a lighthouse, beaches, a maritime museum, shops, boat slips, and a mile-long Acheson Ventures waterfront development that when finished will cost hundreds of millions of dollars.

Still, the downtown in the city of 32,000 mostly sleeps after 5 p.m.

"It takes time to create these tony little places in these industrial towns," Durant said.

## Rekindling pride

Many in the town are skeptical, but hopeful. At the Quay Street Brewing Co. on Wednesday night, a Caesar-salad and grilled salmon kind of joint where a demographic cross-section converges, residents contemplated becoming the "Maritime Capital of the Great Lakes."

They milled on the wood deck overlooking the Black River, a slip of water that feeds the St. Clair river.

"This place is dying," said Ed Hess, 49, who had gotten married early in the day at the courthouse and was knocking back suds. The patent office "should just give it to us."

Jerry Kinna, a friend of Hess there to celebrate, offered the same bemused and sarcastic response at first, too: "We are the garbage gateway to the Great Lakes," he said, referring to the trucks hauling trash over the Blue Water Bridge from Canada.

Then he thought about it. And he changed his mind.

The nickname, he said, is good. No one else thought of it. Port Huron is a great town. A hidden treasure.

Not long after, his wife, Michele Biernot joined the debate, despite her initial reaction that the nickname is "nervy."

Soon, the whole deck rippled with pride. The residents were convincing themselves that their town mattered, that the nickname fit.

So what if you pump the unfinished product? That's the game, said Clary, whose gallery is a few feet away from the brew pub.

Back when this all began, he placed a call to Frankenmuth's Chamber of Commerce. He wanted to know how they did it, how they lured all those tourists to a farm town.

"Michigan's Little Bavaria," he was told, the nickname created in the 1950s.

Fifty years later, if you think Frankenmuth, you think chicken dinners.

And if you think maritime?

"Guess what you are going to be thinking of now?" Clary asked slyly.

The U.S. Patent Office will decide by September.

Contact SHAWN WINDSOR at 313-222-6487 or [windsor@freepress.com](mailto:windsor@freepress.com).



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